August 05, 2010

Dear Reader,

We are glad to present to you the August 2010 issue of Spark, which focuses on the theme 'India Decoded'.

Don't miss our feature, 'Voices of the Month', where we have people from seven interesting backgrounds talking about issues relevant to India today. Well, don't miss our guest columns too! And, there is our usual share of photography, non-fiction and poetry from our team members.

There, dear reader, we have made a sincere effort to decode the multifaceted India from as many aspects as possible. In doing so, we hope to make everyone realize the pride in being an Indian, while also highlighting what’s the need of the hour to make a progressive India.

If you liked our effort this month, please do send us an email to comments.spark@gmail.com or drop a comment at http://sparkthemag.wordpress.com.

Until we see you next month, it's goodbye from all of us here at Spark!

Happy reading, reflecting and acting,

Cheers,
Spark Editorial Team

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What India Means to Me - A Photo Feature by Jai Chabria

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The land of nurturing greens...

The land of bronze evenings...

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The land of the onward and back...

The land of cloud meetings...

The land of silver linings...

The land of the never ending...

The land of sheltered forms...

The land of unconditional surrender...
Voices of the Month - A Special Feature

** On Social Development and the Role of Media - Aarti Mohan, Editor, The Alternative

** On Indian English Literature - Anita Nair, Bestselling Indian Author

** On Economic Growth and Inflation - Deepa Venkatraghvan, Editor, Personal Finance, Moneycontrol.com, Author

** On Mythology - Devdutt Pattanaik, Mythologist, Author, Illustrator

** On Political Reform - Shantanu Bhagwat, Author of the blog 'Satyameva Jayate'

** On Indian Cinema - Hariharan Krishnan, Director, L.V.Prasad Film & TV Academy, Chennai

** On Encouraging Signs in Indian Sport - Hamsini Ravi, Journalist
On Social Development and the Role of Media

Aarti Mohan is the editor of The Alternative, an online platform that strives to chronicle and support social development in India.

Stand at any busy traffic signal in an Indian city. More often than not, at least 8 out of 10 people will open their wallets or empty their pockets of change for the beggar who pleads with outstretched arms. Yet as a nation, we rank among the lowest in the world, with only a 10% share of India’s annual donation corpus coming from individuals.

We are “hand-me-down” lovers; everything from clothes to baby cots, furniture, utensils and what you have gets preserved in lofts and dusty trunks or almirahs and handed down across generations; used and re-used till it disintegrates. Yet very ironically, food that could feed 14 million people currently rots untouched in godowns and under tarpaulins, whilst over 200 million go hungry. We recycle judiciously – an old saree becomes a blanket, a worn saree a curtain and a torn saree a mop cloth! The rags, paper, plastic or furniture we throw out is lapped up by an informal market that makes a living out of recycling every bit of scrap. Yet our greenhouse gas emissions are going to triple in the next 20 years.

The good part is that a social conscience has been unconsciously ingrained in our core culture and value systems. The bad part is that the inequity in India is only growing wider by the day. 400 million live below $1.25 a day, 142 million children don’t go school, and half of India’s women are illiterate. And worse still, we as a collective and a nation seem to be faring rather badly on the same counts that we excel in as individuals.

Our hearts are in the right place though. 3.3 million NGOs (a few million more than necessary if you ask me, but that’s a different discussion altogether!) work in India for the cause of the underserved. The Government allotted a whopping 39,100 crores just for one scheme – the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS), in 2009. Corporates are increasingly striving to place people and planet before profit.
With so many people, money and intentions chasing the bottom of the pyramid, we ought to be getting closer to solving the problem, though that is still an oversimplification in a country of 1.2 billion very diverse people. What we need to focus on is implementation and the big picture. And I can only think of two sections, principally free from vested interests, which can engage with the system and ensure that a democracy functions not just in letter but also in spirit: civil society, backed by an independent media.

Ensuring that there is no corruption all over India may be a pipe dream, but as an informed public, we can collectively ensure that our local wards are clean. Our communities can be free of child labourers, abused women and homeless labourers, if we can only act together to empower them. We are all a part of the same system, and a balance is vital to ensure the health of society.

No one can witness poverty in the innards of our country and be immune to it. A friend who is a photographer and spends most of his life in conflict areas once said, “More than a desire, I have a responsibility to tell the stories of these people.” Development needs a dedicated mainstream space in our media; it needs constant attention, context and relentless follow up. The right information in the hands of the people can empower them to question status quo and force change.

In a country that has one of the most progressive Right To Information laws, where it was possible for a Jessica Lal to get justice due to public outcry and media attention, social change is not just possible, but imminent. We need to just become a part of the movement.
Do you think the Indian literature scene today is influencing the country's image globally? Would you call it a positive influence?

Most of what is published in India seldom travels the world. However, of what is published worldwide is how the country is perceived. It isn’t exactly a positive image of India that is circulated worldwide. For every writer who writes about contemporary India, there are half a dozen writers whose fiction resides in the realm of nostalgia. For every writer who writes about what constitutes India as it is today, there is another writer who will emphasize on the third world imagery.

How would you view the growing popularity of the quick read kind of novels in India?

Interesting. To me these books represent wading pools. This is where reading India will first have to conquer their fear of reading before they are ready to swim beyond their depth.

Finally, blogs have thrown the doors open to a whole bunch of new authors. It would be interesting to know what you think of this trend.

Blogs have a purpose namely, to be able to let writers exhibit their voice, style and extent of literary ambition. However when bloggers set themselves up as experts on literature they tend to become didactic and judgmental.
On Economic Growth and Inflation

Deepa Venkatraghvan is a Chartered Accountant and the Personal Finance editor at web18 (www.moneycontrol.com). She is also the author of the CNBC-TV18 Bestsellers "Everything you ever wanted to know about investing" (which was later updated and released as, "Everything you wanted to know about investing in difficult times") and “What your financial agent will tell you and why you shouldn't listen”.

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) upped the repo and reverse repo rates on July 27 in a bid to rein in inflation while also trying to keep economic growth intact. I had a chat with 'growth' and 'inflation' and here are excerpts from my conversation:

Me: So which of you is more important?

Growth: Me, without a doubt. In India, I rule.

Me: Why so?

Growth: If the Government gave the right environment for industry to grow, employment will grow. If employment grows, health improves, education improves, lifestyle improves, change happens.

Me: That isn't so easy. In India, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

Growth: India has a unique problem - employment is not just 'organised'. There is a huge 'unorganised' workforce that depends on the 'organised' workforce. And the organised workforce doesn't share enough with the unorganised.

Me: You are sounding socialist now. What are you referring to by 'sharing'?

Growth: If your company did well and gave you a pay hike, you can pass on that benefit to your driver, the house maid and any kind of domestic help. They can then afford better housing, better education for their children and a better lifestyle. All that, provided you share your growth story with them fairly. If you cringe to give your housemaid a 10% hike every year but are happy to while away precious plenteys at the mall and multiplex, that won't do any good. You can all cry about the fact that the Government does nothing to help the poor,
that all your taxes are in vain. But your company too pays more tax for more profits but it also hikes your salaries.

Me: Hmm...

Growth: Your company 'shares' because it has to share, because investors are watching, the labour laws are watching.

Me: Will the lower middle class and the poor really benefit from a marginal increase, in terms of lifestyle, housing and education?

Growth: It is not an overnight change. I am not saying a pay hike will drastically alter their lives but they will at least be able to afford schooling and good food for their kids. The children get educated, find jobs in the organised or semi-organised sector and then move up the chain. The point is in most households I know, people won't think twice before splurging on something they don't need but they make sure maids get paid only that much.

Inflation: That's where I come in. If the lower class has more money in their pockets they are going to spend more. That is only going to heat me up.

Me: That's a point.

Growth: Yes, but increasing interest rates won't solve that problem. If people are consuming more, the Government must find ways to produce more - improve irrigation, land reforms, give agriculture a push.

Inflation: But that takes care of cost push inflation. What happens in case of demand pull inflation? When there is just too much money chasing the limited resources in the system? The Government simply has to increase interest rates.

Growth: Yes, then the Government needs to hike interest rates to prevent a runaway situation and prevent the economy from overheating. But that is not the case in India today. The growth story is real because the demand is real. There is no overheating.

Me: Wow, that was heavy duty stuff. Thanks, guys, for taking time off to chat with me.
How relevant do you think Indian Mythology is to urban India today, given the fast-paced and technology-driven lives we lead?

Your question is based on the assumption that mythology is simply fantastic stories of gods and goddesses. Gods and goddesses are merely symbols whose stories reflect the eternal issues that plague the human mind. Myth is subjective truth communicated through stories, symbols and rituals. Every human being, whether or not he/she is technologically-driven, has a subjective truth. In other words, every human being lives in a personal reality constructed by stories that shapes his/her understanding of the world at all times. This personal reality, this private subjective world, is indifferent to rationality. Thus mythology is always relevant.

Do you think Indian youth today understand mythology the way it should be understood? Or, is there a gap?

The gap is the assumption that we are logical creatures. We are not. Our issues are the same as that of our ancestors, mobile phones and iPads and cars notwithstanding.

If there is a gap, what's the best way to address it?

There's no need to address it. People who seek answers will automatically drift towards it. The rest will remain lost until they take responsibility to make sense of it all.
On Political Reform in India

Shantanu Bhagwat is the author of the popular blog **Satyameva Jayate** where he discusses Indian politics, history and religion. He is a graduate in Computer Engineering and also holds an MBA from London Business School where he was a Chevening Scholar. He has also been a part of the Indian Foreign Service. A political activist by choice, Shantanu now divides his time between India and the U.K. He is now working with early stage companies and on ideas to improve political systems and governance in India. And he has a message: “Get Interested. Get Informed. Get Involved.”, he says, "Contribute, support and spread the word; Contribute with your skills and your ideas. Join us in reclaiming India!"

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Compared to a vast majority of my fellow citizens, I have had a privileged existence. And I have been extremely fortunate to have the opportunities to realise my potential.

Many of our fellow citizens are denied this opportunity. For them, the doors to a better, brighter future are shut. For them, the joy of achievement is something that they may never experience. For them, each day is a monumental struggle.

It does not have to be like that.

I belong to a very rich and blessed country. Yet my fellow Indians are destitute and miserable.

Have you ever paused to think why? Have you ever paused to think how can this be changed?

Until a few years ago, whenever I had thoughts like these, I used to find something worthwhile that someone was doing and make a charitable contribution.

Gradually it dawned on me that charity will not solve this problem. It cannot. I realised that the roots of our poor development, the suffering of millions, the pain and the despair that the vast majority face everyday, were elsewhere.
It was becoming clearer to me that India’s ‘fundamental problem’ was poor governance and bad policies. And there was only one way to change that.

Fortunately, that way did not require a bloody revolution.

One of the “blessings” of being an Indian is to belong to a democracy, to a system where change can be brought about by popular will.

But living amidst freedom, amidst a free society, entails responsibilities and duties. Somewhere along the way, we – the healthy, educated and fortunate citizens of India – began to take the “fruits” of freedom for granted and forgot the responsibilities that these entailed.

Today I am asking you to think about those responsibilities.

I am asking you to think how a group of committed and passionate people can break the mould. I am asking you to think how we can change the paradigm of popular politics, of vote-banks, electoral compromises and sub-serving of national interest.

Today I am asking you to think how we can take this powerful idea – an idea of changing India – and actually make it work.

The need of the hour is to reclaim our country which is being pushed to the brink and is being sliced and diced in pieces to satisfy the hunger of those in power. It’s time we reclaim our “Rashtra” that is in danger of losing its “Raashtraiyata”. It’s time we free India from the clutches of the incompetent, the unfaithful and the self-serving.

Remember, you play a big and important part in India’s future!

Jai Hind, Jai Bharat!

Click here to visit Satyameva Jayate's Facebook page.
Hariharan Krishnan is Director, L.V. Prasad Film & TV Academy, Chennai, where he also heads the department of direction. Hariharan, who is a graduate from FTII Pune, is the director of the National Award winning Tamil film, 'Ezhavadhu Manidhan'. He also has many documentaries, children's films and short features to his credit. Hariharan is a visiting faculty member at the Asian College of Journalism, Chennai and at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.

How successful has Bollywood been in defining 'Brand India'?

Within a typical consumerist framework there is no doubt that the term 'Bollywood' has established India and her cinema on the world map. But unfortunately, like most of the late-capitalist initiatives, it has come at a huge price. A small group of star-studded films from Mumbai have come to represent the face of Indian cinema and all her dynamic nuances. And the emerging corporate film world, despite being run by the most qualified MBAs and Cost Accountants, is tagging onto this brand name and trying to leverage international investments into such a mythical zone.

What is your opinion on how receptive the industry is to 'meaningful cinema' - do you see Bollywood moving beyond glitzy glamour and its running-around-the-trees identity?

Honestly, I would not like to be arrogant and declare that 'Bollywood' does not make meaningful films. After all, films like 'Lagaan' 'Swades' or 'Rang De Basanti' have come from this so-called stable. At the same time, I would also like to say that I will not look down upon films with songs and glamorous looking people. They too are a kind of genre that we need to accept and just because film scholars/ critics consider it fashionable to run them down, we need not follow suit.
How have the regional film industries, particularly the Tamil and Telugu industries shaped India's brand image in recent years?

Unfortunately, regional cinema has come to be associated with non-Hindi language cinemas. I think a film like 'Maqbool' or 'Parzania' are the regional cinemas of Mumbai while films like 'Sivaji' or 'Ravan' are the 'Bollywood' type films from the so-called regions. Malayalam cinema is in severe crisis today because it has become trendy to get away from their regular 'realistic' diet to mimicking the big budget Tamil films.

So, can we say that as far as non-Hindi movies are concerned, it's the films made on a big scale that are recognized nationally and globally and are adding a dimension to Indian cinema?

Yes and no. At the box office the big films get obviously recognized. But the 'other' variety gets all the attention at the various international and national film festivals where they also get a lot of media attention. The recent film 'Udaan' is an example. A lot of hype at Cannes but a box office dud!

Finally, do you think the newer Indian films, say in the last fifteen years, (despite the language) have succeeded in imbibing patriotism and a sense of responsibility towards the country among the audience?

In today's trans-national world-view 'patriotism' is a meaningless term! In fact it is even a slightly dangerous term since it forces you to subscribe to certain 'exclusive' ideas like religion or borders or ethnic groups as 'ours' and the rest of 'the others'. So, I wish that this kind of 'patriotism' is not thought of being synonymous with 'imbibing a sense of responsibility'! In short 'hating Pakistan' should not be see as anyone's sense of being a 'good' citizen!

That's a very interesting and thought provoking perspective on patriotism. Yet, how successful has Indian cinema been in recent years, in telling youngsters about their role in shaping our society, in terms of social responsibility?

I don't think films tell youngsters anything instructional or moral for them to go and follow suit. If media scholars do see any such influential reaction then there are many other factors besides cinema at play! Let us not believe that audiences are gullible enough to get inputs on 'social responsibility' from films!
On Encouraging Signs in Indian Sport

Hamsini Ravi works for the news desk of The New Indian Express in Chennai. Reading, writing and sports are a few of her interests. She has a thing for chocolate, her own and other people’s. She dreams of a utopian world, where there is no poverty or gender discrimination and where chocolate has no calories.

I’m a great fan of India Shining stories. Well, not quite the ‘since-we-all-work-in-glass-steel-buildings-we-can-afford-malls-and-multiplexes’ kind of stories, but the ones that make me believe that the much talked about ‘great Indian growth story’ could actually be of some use to the masses to whom globalisation is as much a farce as the shiny glass and steel buildings. I’ve noticed that stories of the latter type come out of the most unlikely places. Like the son of an idli vendor who is now a big businessman-cum-philanthropist or the girl who created several model villages using the Right To Information act.

One evening, during my internship with a big newspaper in Chennai, I was asked to accompany a senior sports reporter to an assignment to interview some beach volleyball players. My only past brushings with beach volleyball were watching hardly-clad firang women on TV! I had no idea that beach volleyball was played in India, let alone that we even had players who frequently represented India in the world stage. Curious, and a little amused, I went expecting a bunch of kids who’d probably be tucked away in an artificial beach in some quiet part of Chennai. Images of bikinis, privileged kids playing the sport only as a passport to bag the much coveted medical college seat later fluttered in my mind.

Instead, the senior reporter steered towards Nehru stadium, which boasted of an artificial beach volleyball turf. As we watched the two pairs of girls and boys in action on the court, I couldn’t help admiring their gymnastic abilities, coordination and nimble feet that looked so natural on the golden sands. Revathi and Pavithra, all of 17, were practicing extra hard because they had been chosen for the first ever Asian Youth Games to be held in Singapore the following week.
Pavithra’s father is an auto driver and Revathi’s widowed mother is a farm labourer near Coimbatore. Both are products of Sports Development Authority of Tamil Nadu (SDAT)’s Sports Hostel. The unique and successful initiative scouts for sporting talent, especially in rural areas, and then mentors a sportsperson in a particular sport, sponsoring their living, sports and education costs along the way.

Thanks to such an initiative, Revathi and Pavithra, are today not just seasoned junior beach volleyball players who have participated in a couple of international tournaments, they are also young college students on full scholarship in tuition and hostel, thanks to SDAT’s emphasis on higher education. In another world, they would have been burdens to their respective families in our rather patriarchal structure, factoring education, dowry, marriage and other costs. But thanks to sports and the confidence that comes along with playing it, they’re international volleyball players apart from being computer science college students, who’d not only be an asset to their families but also catalysts who’d spur socio-economic mobility for generations to come.

Picture by chandimak
What does India mean to her and other Tibetans who live in India? Tenzin Pema shares her thoughts and experiences.

His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, the spiritual head of the Tibetan people, in a recent media interview referred to India as ‘my country.’ “I refer to India as my country because I have spent half of my life here... If you open my brain I am 100 percent Indian,” he had said. This statement by the Tibetan people’s beloved leader has earned much criticism in Chinese Communist press, as have his earlier references to himself as ‘son of India.’ Yet, despite the Chinese government’s attempts to mar the Tibetan leader in the eyes of his people in Tibet, by deliberately misreading his statements, there is not an iota of doubt that Tibetans in exile, after over fifty years of life in India, are no less Indian than their benevolent hosts.

Indeed, if you were to speak to or socialise with any Tibetan living in India, or even with many of those settled in other parts of the world, you will find that they are very much Indian - in the values and principles of life they uphold; in the myriad local tongues they speak; in the thorough delight they take in pleasing their palates with spicy Indian food; in their absolute worship of Bollywood and all its ‘heroes’ and ‘heroines’, to name among a few of their shared likes. Years of living in this beautiful country, with so many of her rich influences have shaped the lives of many a Tibetan life - from those in southern-most Bylakuppe, one among the many Tibetan refugee ‘camps’ situated near Mysore, to their friends and relatives in the picturesque North Indian-town of Dharamsala, or ‘Little Lhasa’ as it is so fondly referred to by tourists and writers, home to the Dalai Lama and the official seat of the Tibetan exile government.

There is also the more profound explanation of the centuries-old Tibetan connection with India. India’s influence on Tibet and Tibetan history began several hundred years ago when her scholars and religious masters travelled to
the remote mountain kingdom to impart the teachings of Lord Buddha. Ever since, Tibet has shed its more aggressive and violent way of life, and instead adopted a more compassionate and peace-loving lifestyle. His Holiness the Dalai Lama so often during his teachings refers to this age-old relationship between India and Tibet, speaking with great reverence about the spiritual masters from Nalanda University. His Holiness has, on many occasions, said the relationship between India and Tibet is that of a ‘guru’ and ‘chela’ (teacher and disciple). "India is the guru and we are the reliable chelas. Since we have produced Buddhist scholars according to Nalanda tradition, we could be termed as reliable chelas for keeping the Nalanda tradition of Buddhism intact," His Holiness has said. Thus, even Tibetan Buddhism, which has been so central to the lives of ordinary Tibetans for centuries together and which partly defines the very existence and popularity of the Tibetan cause to this day, is India’s most precious gift to Tibetans.

For Tibetan exiles today, India means more than the land that gave birth to their beloved Buddha Dharma, for to them, India is now a ‘home’ away from home. This, despite the fact that Tibetans, even though many have been born in India, live here with a stay permit that is processed through a document called Registration Certificate (RC), which is renewed every six months or every year. Among Tibetan exiles, there is a common and binding love for the people that shared their land with them. They never forget the fact that when the first generation Tibetan refugees followed their beloved leader into exile in 1959, India and her people gave them a new lease of life. Despite the harsh weather conditions, the unfamiliar diet, the alien language and most of all, the fear of

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having to start life anew, Tibetan life gradually took shape in almost every corner of India. And it was this country, which in allowing this consequentially, ensured the revival of Tibetan traditions, culture, language and religion.

Thanks to India’s timely support, the Tibetan way of life, which is fast facing complete annihilation in Chinese-occupied Tibet, has taken a much firmer root in the Tibetan people’s second home. Proof of this is evident in every visit you make to the different parts of the subcontinent - be it to Delhi’s Majnu-ka-Tilla, famed for its shopping complexes and for cheap Tibetan beer or chang; or to the South Indian Tibetan settlement of Bylakuppe with its charming cluster of ‘camps’ interspersed with golden-roofed monasteries; or the more well-known hill-top town of Dharamsala, a sure-fire stop for Western tourists hoping to catch a glimpse of or even meet with the Dalai Lama; or the roadsides of cities like Nagpur, Kolkata and Bangalore that are lined with rows of Tibetans selling woolen wear in makeshift shops; or even the holy Buddhist site of Bodh Gaya, whose landmark Mahabodhi Temple is speckled with maroon-robed monks and devout lay-Tibetans circling the temple in continuous circumambulation.

In these sights lies another fact, the overpowering Tibetan presence in India, as the country continues, even till this day, to welcome Tibetans escaping the tyranny of Chinese rule in Tibet. A Tibetan friend, who currently lives in the United States, says “For a second-generation Tibetan exile like me, India is my first home.” Like many Tibetans, she says she is overwhelmed by gratitude each time her thoughts turn to India, where she received her much-needed foundation of modern-day education coupled with the traditional Tibetan upbringing, thus, allowing her and many others like her to strike the fine
balance between the modern and the traditional.

Still, despite this seemingly fine balance, Tibetans are more Indian than they appear. While a north-Indian may not speak the local language of a south Indian state, a Tibetan can occasionally be sighted rattling off to the dozen with a local shopkeeper or haggling with an auto-rickshaw driver. Also, while some south Indians do not speak Hindi, Tibetans are so fluent in the language that they use it as if it were their ‘first’ language. This perhaps explains the originations of this running joke among the Tibetan people that Tibetans in exile speak ‘impure’ Tibetan; their Tibetan is ‘mixed’ with Hindi terms to define different things - like their choice of the word aloo for potato, and pura for all, instead of their lesser used respective Tibetan alternatives of shogo and tsangma.

So, it is no wonder then that another exile Tibetan, referring to His Holiness’ recent ‘100 percent Indian’ statement, said that in many ways, he too feels like his brain would reveal the same thing. The only difference, he was quick to add, would be that his head would be filled with Bollywood movies, Hindi songs and dances, Indian food, and memories of little Indian towns and villages that he has known as home.

“The only time I remember I’m a refugee is during the annual renewal of my Registration Certificate,” he said. “Otherwise, I feel so much at home in India.”

Tenzin Pema works as a business journalist and is also on the advisory board of Global Tibetan Professionals Network. She also writes for Tibetan journals during her free time. To read more of Tenzin's updates, visit her blog.

Lobsang Wangyal is a freelance photojournalist, and, what he calls, a small town impresario. He produces different art and entertainment events, and runs the Tibet Sun website.

Abhishek Madhukar is a photographer and journalist based in Dharamsala.
A symbol of the Independence struggle - the Andaman Jail.
The reward for the struggle - Identity, Independence.

Today, peace, as serene as these blue waters, is the need of the hour.
May we look back at what great men have done for this country and follow the footprints.

Let's dream to make India heaven on earth - and raise our voices for peace!
“idli vada
Sir?”
asks the waiter
at the
breakfast place;
“sure,”
smiles
the busy
one,
in the middle
of his steaming
brown gravy;
dhak dhak,
goes urad - .
the proud offspring
of
the rain soaked
Deccan.

Then the train
chugs lazily
up
to the centre,
just out of reach
of the drenched
Deccan fields.
With the showers
just about enough,
before long
it has struck gold.
Hey, calls out
the yellow gravy
left to simmer
on the low flame;
into the crackling
tad ka,
goes arhar.

huff..puff -
now the journey
becomes a climb,
when the plains
seem to change
their mind,
just within
the grasp
of winter’s
cool fingers,
sings the soil
rich with wealth,
from the land
of the five rivers.
Hey, wait
there’s food
here too!
From beside
the blob
of cooked green,
comes the a-maize-d
chuckle
mak ka..
says “yoo hoo!!”
Now the wind has a bite to it; the rocks have hardened beneath the feet. The nip in the air calls out from afar, over the tops of the mountains. “Come hither,” call the secrets up the sleeves of the lofty ones. The steaming hot cup of broth in the biting cold, whispers - “Now take a sip of me,” coaxes barley.

Goodbye, the train calls with a sigh, as it enters sandy stretches to the west. The glowing embers, the desert air, the camel mountains, of shifting sands. The pan silent, letting it roast in the whistling winds. Pats on its back, round round, turn, slap in the plate, lands one neat roasted bread. Jowar cackles - “Hello there!”

About turn now it chugs, parallel to the mountains; the train has entered a different soil. Now it rains, now it doesn’t; “Ah, but wait! You must come for tea,” call out Assam, Darjeeling! The stars are out now in the clear dark far above; It’s dinner time soon, the clouds have passed, the air is heavy with moisture;
not to fret
says this one,
green and friendly;
clouds may come
and clouds may go,
but not food
in this land
you call home.
Oh, soon it will be
time to return
to urad land;
but not without
shaking hands
with
dearest moong!
It has indeed been a phenomenal journey for Television in India right from the days of The Ramayana and The Mahabharatha to the reality shows of today. Swetha Ramachandran takes us on a walk down the memory lane, touching upon the milestone programmes that have defined the remarkable growth of Television in India.

Deserted roads, absolute silence to be disturbed only with an occasional yelp from a street dog, shops with shutters drawn, no sight of a train or bus moving by! If you grew up in India in the 80s, you probably would be able to relate to this scene. This was how Sunday mornings were like, in most parts of India when in 1987, the epic ‘Ramayana’ began to be aired on television. The country had just been introduced to the wonder box and it was through the serial of ‘Ramayana’, with entire families crowding around, that Indians began their tryst with the television. With manufacturers like Solidaire, Dyanora and Philips being the only ones in the market during the initial days, only a privileged lot owned the wonder box! Owning a television was a luxury and the proud owners would often invite their neighbours to watch a programme or two.

With the telecast of the serial ‘Ramayana’, based on the Hindu mythological story, television became a great hit with the Indian audience. The actors who played the role of Ram and Sita were worshipped and idolised, and reel life characters became real. The ‘Ramayana’ was followed suit by the ‘Mahabharata’.
B.R. Chopra’s televised version of the epic bowled the people over with its talented actors who brought to life characters who had remained confined to books till then. It was through these on-screen adaptations that many an Indian kid came to know of the mighty epics. Government-owned Doordarshan (DD) was the only available channel of those times and the broadcaster of these hit serials. Children from the 80s and early 90s will fondly remember getting their general knowledge fix from Siddhartha Basu’s ‘Quiz Time’ and knowing of the latest chartbusters through the Indian film music programme ‘Chitrahaar’ and its Tamil counterpart ‘Oliyum Oliyum’.

With time, DD began to diversify into producing series other than those based on epics. One such massively popular series was ‘Junoon,’ the story of a feud between two wealthy families. Originally telecasted in Hindi, Junoon was soon dubbed into Tamil too. It attracted a great viewership and created a revolution down south for the distinct Tamil it used (in order to match the lip sync), which later came to be known as ‘Junoon Tamil’.

Within a matter of a few years, televisions started to invade each and every house and were no longer considered luxury. Gone were the times when a whole village would gather in front of a single television in awe. Indian television expanded its wings and spotting the opportunity, a number of networks like Sun, Star and Zee set up channels in various Indian languages. With the entry of CNN, NGC and Discovery, Indian viewers got the chance to enjoy the beauty of the Niagara within the confines of one’s home and watch the lion chase a deer without having to visit the African forests. The dawn of the new millennium has been typified by reality shows. Indian channels began to ape British and American shows like ‘Who Wants to be a Millionaire’, ‘American Idol’, coming up with shows suited for Indian tastes. ‘Kaun Banega Crorepati’, the Indian version of ‘Who Wants to be a Millionaire’ completed three successful seasons and is all set for the fourth one too. ‘Indian Idol’, ‘Airtel Super Singer’, ‘Dance India Dance’, ‘Jodi Number One’ and a lot of other shows on the lines of ‘American Idol’ have managed to woo viewers all over India, keeping them on their toes with the extensive drama and talent involved.

Western culture continues to exert its influence through reality television shows such as ‘Splitsvilla’ or ‘Rakhi ka Swayamvar’ (a show for celebrity Rakhi Sawant to pick a man to marry) or ‘Pati, Patni aur Woh’. The fame associated with reality shows and the attractive rewards given to the winners have made this genre of television a massive hit in India too. Meanwhile, Indian soaps have managed to remain favourites among Indians, with their regular followers, especially aged people who possess the ability to not get confused between Gita of one serial with Rita of the other!
From black and white Solitaire television sets to Samsung home theatre systems, cable TV to Direct to Home (DTH) services, India has come a long way in the television industry. What with the High Definition programming and recording now available, watching television is no longer an entertainment but an experience. Also, thanks to the telly, the gap between villages and cities has certainly been bridged to a great extent by making villagers aware of everything from technological advancements to the hottest gossip in the film industry! This wonder box has indeed broadened the thoughts and views of people by exposing them to what is happening outside their country too.

Wonder what it will be next! 3-D televisions are already available in the market, so is it going to be just a while before we all sit at home, 3-D glasses on, maybe watching the arrows from Ramayana zoom right through into our eyes?
Think Singapore, think clean roads, efficiency, and... fines. So when a Singaporean visited India, what happened? Eugenia Koh, who recently visited Delhi, Agra, Udaipur and Jaipur, shares more about her trip - in typical Singapore style! Text and pictures by Eugenia Koh.

One of the worst kept secrets about Singaporeans is that we love acronyms. Driving about Singapore? Ask any Singaporean and you would be told to take the CTE, BKE and AYE, and warned about the ERP.

Being born and bred in Singapore, I am hence going to recount my recent trip to India with an acronym – INCREDIBLE! (Yes, the Incredible India advertisement by the Tourism Authority of India has made a firm imprint on me!)

Indian weddings – I love Indian weddings and it was for a wedding that my friends and I flew into Delhi. My favorite part of the Indian wedding? Definitely the sangeet! What I love about it is the festivity and dancing involved – from the young to the old, everyone gets on their toes to celebrate the joyous union of husband and wife. It was heart-warming seeing all the grandmothers, grandfathers and grand aunties on the dance floor, a sight that would definitely not be seen in the traditional Chinese weddings!
**Naan** – Food is an extremely important component of trips for any Singaporean and my friends and I were looking forward to chomping down tons of naan, butter chicken and palak paneer, alongside cups of masala chai. We were not disappointed. The food was absolutely fabulous! We Chinese are typically a carnivorous people and we never really understood how one can be vegetarian and miss out on the joys of meat. Traveling in India and being faced with the huge range of vegetarian options showed me that this was definitely possible – just not back home! So where did I have my best meal? I would say it would have to be at Ambrai in Udaipur!

**Culture** – The Indian civilization dates back to more than 3000 years ago and the various forts we visited were steeped in such rich history and culture. From tales of the great king Akbar to the great lover Shah Jahan, each monument and fort captured our imagination and filled us with an awe of the glorious empires of before.

**Restful** – While India is typically portrayed as being chaotic, amidst a backdrop of traffic and slums, I found rest and tranquility in Udaipur. Udaipur – the charming lake city of the Golden Triangle – drew us in with its laid-back hospitality and many lakes. The beauty of India is being able to afford some luxury without breaking the bank. While my friends and I are certainly not in the same league as the Hollywood jetsetters – whom we’ve been told include Madonna, Richard Gere, Julia Roberts and Nicole Kidman – living it up at the famous Lake Palace Hotel, we found our own slice of haven at Radisson Plaza Resort & Spa, Udaipur.
Energy – there is tremendous energy in India, belonging to a people living in a time of change, of economic progress and development. This energy is uplifting, especially when we see how the young are striving for a better tomorrow. There was this young boy I met while purchasing some bangles in a small shop in Jaipur. My friend and I walked in near closing time, desperate to accomplish our mission of shopping for bangles. This young boy was tending the shop alongside some others, and his service was just impeccable. He was smiling and patient with our ceaseless demands to see design after design, and at the end of it all even refused the tip which we had wanted to give him! We left not just satisfied with our buys, but highly impressed by the attitude of hard work and professionalism shown by our young attendant.

Design – In the land of maharajahs, one would expect only the best in design for their palaces. As I gazed at each intricate carving and workmanship – be it the Qutub Minar, the Taj, or at the Amber Fort – talent and skill come to mind. It’s mind blowing to think that so many years ago, people were already so advanced in their craft. It makes me wonder – for all the accomplishments mankind has touted through the years – whether we have truly progressed in skill, or if we have sadly lost a valuable set of craft and exchanged it for another.

Intense – From Chandi Chowk to the traffic jams and packed auto rickshaws, intense is one word that comes to mind. It didn’t matter how many times we came across these packed cycle rickshaws through our trip. Each time I continued to be amazed at the number of people that could be packed in, and the ease with which they hung on as the rickshaws raced through traffic alongside the Nanos, BMWs and heavy duty trucks.
Laxness – Coming from a country known for its strict laws (yes, there is no sale of chewing gum and you can be fined for jaywalking – though everyone still does it!), seeing and hearing of corruption each day was jarring to us. We saw many policemen along the highways who were trying to collect bribes from the vehicles, and ourselves were stopped for a long time as our driver was made to negotiate having to make additional payment for entering one of the cities. Along the way, we heard stories of the targets which these policemen had to meet in terms of the bribes collected, and how many have gotten away as long as they had deep coffers.

Beauty – Sadly for many Singaporeans, our perception of India has been heavily influenced by Slumdog Millionaire – of India being one big dirty and grubby country. What surprised me was hence, the beauty that was found through all the cities I visited – not just at the majestic Taj Mahal but also at Lodi Gardens in the heart of Delhi, the breathtaking sunset when driving into the pink city of Jaipur and alongside the famous Lake Pichola.

Extreme – Everyone who has visited India say it is a land of extremes. And while one heads to India prepared to witness such extremes, it still strikes you and makes you reflect and ponder. To be fair, India is not the only country with extremes – in many, if not all countries, there continues to be a huge income divide, a huge disparity between the haves and have-nots. I guess what’s striking though to me is the extreme indifference towards women in the countryside. As we were driving through the towns, we saw many women in the fields toiling, many women who were making fuel from cow dung. Where were the men? Chit chatting, drinking and gambling by the side! As a woman myself, I must say I was suitably annoyed at the sight!

Bitten by the travel bug, Eugenia loves exploring and setting foot on new sights and lands. An optimist by nature, she finds beauty and fingerprints of God’s goodness wherever the cheap air fares and travel winds blow.
The Craze called Cricket

Anupama Krishnakumar

Cricket and India - Need we say more? Inseparable, that's the word. Anupama Krishnakumar shares some thoughts on the cricket craze in India - what she finds interesting about this phenomenon, inspite of not being a fan of the game.

My 90-year old grandfather keeps a diary. If you are wondering what a 90-year old does with a diary, well, he keeps track of test and ODI cricket match schedules! He will never miss a match which India is playing; he doesn’t mind watching matches that doesn’t feature India too. All that matters that it has to be a game of cricket!

My mother loves Gundappa Viswanath! She can go on for hours and hours about her favourite, charming cricketer!

My husband is hooked on to Brian Lara’s Cricket on the X-box!

My two-and-a-half year son exclaims fours and sixes for all the random shots that he hits with his sometimes blue, sometimes red, sometimes cream bat (yeah, he has three of them!) and the ball of any size or colour that he can lay his hands on!

Coming to think of it, I am an aberration in the family as far as cricketing tastes are concerned. The thousand different terms confuse me; a match, more often than not, doesn’t get me hooked except when it’s a nail-biting finish that it is heading to. I used to pray that Tendulkar should hang on at the crease, once upon a time, not because I really was keen on the game, but because Grandpa would ask me to! I could never say no to the old man’s innocent craze!
Despite my so-called lack of enthusiasm for the game (Did I say I love tennis? Well, that’s a different story altogether!), I am always awestruck at the kind of influence that a bat and a ball and eleven men have on the psyche of millions of people. Cricket is a game alright, but that’s just for the rest of the world. But for scores of Indians, cricket is a religion in its own might! We worship those men in blue — Sachin Tendulkar, Saurav Ganguly, M.S. Dhoni, and earlier, Sunil Gavaskar, Kapil Dev and many more! Young girls fill their walls with their posters. They even dream of lives with their cricketing Gods! When Dhoni’s marriage news broke out of the blue, a million hearts were broken; that in fact became a fancy headline for the media! Cricket crazy, we are, aren’t we?

Get on to the street on a lazy weekend or a holiday in any Indian city; street cricket will invariably invite you. Be it a team of young boys, young adults or adults, they are out there, soaking in the spirit of cricket, shouting, concentrating and arguing! Pass by an electronic goods showroom on the day of a match, you will find at least fifty men glued to the display TV sets merrily following the proceedings of the match and clapping and reacting enthusiastically!

Indians scream with joy when India wins, they burst crackers, they garland their men of honour, they hold them close to their hearts. Remember the time India won the first T-20 world championship? Come on, we are a nation that still looks back at 1983 with an unbelievable sense of pride!

But we feel let down too, when the ‘boys’ lose. We hold everything against them – even the most straight of statements are twisted and given a new meaning. We scoff at them for being irresponsible! The cricketers are perhaps the fewest of souls that can rise to glory and fall to ashes at the wink of an eye!

The times I really wonder whether this craze is even worth it, is when people die of heart attacks at the loss of a game or when the sport becomes a breeding ground for controversies and no longer remains a game.

Let’s take the case of the IPL. The IPL is in a way India’s pride; it has had cricketers from across the world rushing in to be a part of the IPL scene. But, the controversies that have raged on are indeed a big disappointment and surely tarnish the reputation of a cricketing event that has a mighty big fan following across the globe.
And of course, clichéd I may sound, but, it is also quite upsetting that other sports do not garner as much attention as cricket does.

Yet all said and done, cricket has scored its biggest victory in India as a sport, for, it’s not just urban India that is hooked on to it, but also the semi-urban and rural areas that celebrate the spirit of cricket. A game of cricket is perhaps an expression of a common man’s desire to be recognized; his claim to stardom, a small share of it!

I had visited a south-Indian village a few years back as part of an academic assignment. The village was caught in the clutches of poverty; people were struggling for basic amenities, didn’t have enough food and clothing; their shelters were poor. Yet, the village kids flashed bright, confident smiles and most of them went to school. One evening, I saw a bunch of them with a bat and a ball – all poised for a game of cricket. After having watched them for a while, I walked up to the boy who seemed to be dominating the workings of the match in question, and asked him, ‘So, whose bat and ball are these?’

‘It’s mine,’ he said and I wondered if that was why he was dominating! No, not actually, he was seemingly the best of the lot!
‘My uncle who’s working in Chennai got it for me,’ he declared proudly in Tamil.
‘That’s nice,’ I told him. ‘So, which cricketer do you like?’ I asked.
No prizes for guessing.
‘Sachin,’ came the response prompt and clear.

And that in a remote village, deep inside Tamilnadu. That’s India. That’s cricket. That’s cricket and India! *Khelo India Khelo!*
I visited the Birla Planetarium in Chennai recently with my two young children on a weekend. They were thrilled to watch a 3-D movie, a planetarium show, and play with a few working exhibits. There were so many school children who had come from nearby towns and villages, ably managed by their teachers. The thrill on their faces to be in the city, in such an expansive space with scientific wonders made them ignore the heat and their bare feet on a hot summer day. But there are so many things that are so uncared for in what can be a wonderful experience to children and adults:

1. There is plenty of outdoor space with park equipment that is all broken and overgrown with weeds.
2. There are outdoor exhibits that are not well cared for.
3. Of the nearly 80 hands-on exhibits inside, not even 20 of them function.
4. The seats in the planetarium are broken and damaged, spoiling the experience.

Having a planetarium in the central part of a city, with such open space is a boon. It should be a novel experience for visitors. Just as the city's parks are being spruced up and maintained, the outdoor space can be cared for. The school children who come with packed lunch, can eat and play outdoors and make it a day of fun-filled activity.

On weekends (during which time there is maximum crowd), college students can be signed up to volunteer and help with the hands-on exhibits. This is a learning experience for them (as to how to impart knowledge to others) and value for the children who just walk by the exhibits not knowing what they mean and having no one to ask or demonstrate.

Local tourism is booming in India. People are slowly learning to loosen up themselves and their wallets. The increasing number of visitors to places of interest is proof for this. It does not take much to keep ourselves and our environment clean, even with a small cost. Though we are a very young democracy, we can instill values in our youngsters in places like the planetarium by maintaining them well. We can take efforts to keep our environment clean, promote green tourism and build a verdant future for our great country.

Sita Krishnakumar
Chennai, India
Six years ago, when I left the Indian shores to study in Singapore, I was met with a wide variety of ideas about India – some shocking, some outright funny, some thought-provoking. Some made me wonder how less of the real India has actually reached outside of the country, while others – probably inspired by Bollywood – made me roll my eyes. At the same time, these questions made me realise something about India I’d have taken for granted otherwise.

First off, would be the favourite ‘arranged marriage’ question. A number of locals gingerly asked if I was already betrothed to someone. Shocked (I was 17, after all, city-bred with educated parents), ‘No!’ I’d respond, wondering what on earth put this idea in their heads (until I learnt that in Chinese culture, ‘arranged’ meant it was fixed when you were a child that you were to marry this person). And then they would ask how on earth arranged marriages even worked – how could one make a decision about who to live with for the rest of their lives in a matter of a few days?! Did parents actually compare horoscopes for compatibility? Oh, and did the girl’s parents have to pay dowry that the father struggles to pull together? Were many girls actually married off even before they turned 18? What about singing and dancing at the wedding?

Second was the fact that I was vegetarian. ‘Have you never had meat?’ they would ask, with wide-eyed wonder. ‘Never felt like tasting it?’ I would politely shake my head no, choosing not to explain that to me the very concept of eating meat was outright discomforting. In fact, I used to confidently say, more than half my country is vegetarian (never mind what I based this assumption on). I struggled to understand why many of them assumed that I could tell pork from beef, or where chicken nuggets come from (err... chicken?).
There were so many other questions, ranging from corruption to the state of women in the society, to press freedom, to ‘eve teasing’ (I learnt that this – contrary to my assumption – was a uniquely Indian term, and probably a uniquely Indian characteristic!), to why many Indians spoke with each other in English, why some Indians are dark and some fair, or the importance of song and dance in our lives.

Within a couple of years, I realized that the vague answers I had been giving till then were not quite true – I didn’t know what the answers were. Granted I had left the country as but a teenager with hardly any exposure to the actual, outside world – of course, we knew there were poor people; we knew there was corruption; we knew of child marriage and dowry deaths; we knew that Pizza Hut served vegetarian and non-vegetarian pizzas in the same building, but that was all. Coming abroad and mixing with the people here, however, was strangely, a homecoming for me about India. I learnt to distinguish the many tiers present in India. It was as if I was peeling off layers and at each stage, there was a different part of India that I never realized existed. It was interesting that within each layer, there was a beautiful process that also had a less beautiful side to it. Underlying all these discoveries was the dawn of the fact that we are a country of contradictions.

New mothers put brakes on their career for their children; and yet, the society doesn’t look upon them kindly if they do want to continue with their career a few months after. We beautifully coexist with people belonging to various faiths, coming from different regions, speaking different languages, and share food and gossip, and yet we slit each others’ throats in the name of religion. Ours is a country that has welcomed invaders with open arms, taken their cultures and made it its own, and yet we have self-appointed bastions of ‘Indian culture’ rioting about clubs, Valentine’s Day, or a plainly social activity such as drinking and dancing. We place immense importance on loving and taking care of our parents, and yet the wife has to place her husband’s parents first before her own.
Living abroad, I learnt that other cultures were more forgiving; mothers could return to work entrusting their child with a maid, and no one would fault them for being any less a mother to the child. Weddings are rarely as extravagant as Indian weddings, for they are paid for by the bride and the groom, who choose how they want to spend keeping their future in view. ‘Western’ influence is not really classified an influence any longer – we are living in a global village after all. Children love their parents and are yet to free to do what they want as long as they aren’t about ruining their lives – be it dressing, going out or dating; parents don’t micro-manage.

My idea in writing this is not to point out that India is backward in its thinking. It’s to highlight that the country has good intentions but its mind is like a teenager’s – confused, ridden with angst and unsure. We may be a young country, but we are also ancient; we come with centuries of baggage that will obviously have an impact on our thinking and influence our behaviour. As a segment of the population that is educated, has exposure to the world outside of India, it is imperative that we recognize this characteristic of our diverse country. And rather than dub it as a country that will never change in its views, it’s upon us to prod her on and participate. My opinion is that we’re already on the right track – as youth, we are so much more aware of societal issues, make our voices heard, and actively participate in making a difference to the society we are in. With time, won’t we be the progressive nation that has – like so many others in the world – managed to retain its traditions and used them to move forward?

Picture by michaelhays
It's the Mother who does the talking here, about her own children and those who came to her and became her own. She tells you she is a Kaleidoscope, one with colourful little pieces that come together to form beautiful patterns. P.R.Viswanathan mixes prose and poetry to talk about the greatness of his motherland, India, tracing her journey over centuries.

I am India, Mother India. My children say I will be 63 this month and they are celebrating. Only 63! I must look really young. Actually I am very old, not just old, I am ancient. In fact, I do not remember my age. To be on the safe side, let me put it at between 3000 and 10000 years.

America calls itself “the new world”; in some sense that phrase captures the essence of that country – a restless, dynamic, innovative society of migrants. France is defined in equal measure by its revolution and its devotion to its language, to romantic love and wine. John Bull typifies British stolidity and the Britannia Lion, rightly or wrongly, its nobility and fair play. But what does one say about me? What is India? What do I stand for? What is my quintessence? Every description of me seems inadequate or exaggerated. Everything about me is nebulous, hazy. But can you condemn me for this trait? I am a veritable mosaic.

This mosaic is earth’s most ancient culture
Five thousand and more years old
Hoary with quaint tradition, built tile by tile,
Chip by little chip, colours sprinkled from all over
“Aryan” and Dravidian, Arab and Persian,
Jew and Christian, every kind of Mohammedan
And came last, the self-appointed guardian
The white-as-milk, pure-as-snow islander
Sole carrier of humankind’s burden

I am a great receptacle. I have allowed every kind of influence and profited from it. No, I am not passive. I received and absorbed or I fought and fended off and more often was overcome. And even those who overcame me were civilized by me. I have eaten and drunk of the best of them. They say – and rightly too – that I swallow whole, what I find good in others and burp with satisfaction. They came from all over, those who influenced me.
Most came in peace, many in search of peace
Looking for shelter, they found a haven
Some came to trade and some with sword
Some did trade, then unsheathed the sword
Some came and told us we were wrong
And our salvation lay in going along
Accepting their ways and practices
Their gods and rituals, their forms of worship

The mosaic took all, appearing passive
And to each accorded as it thought proper
Sheltered the persecuted, who took her names
Made fortunes and served her all times
Welcomed the trader, who married her daughters
Some of us took up the cross and
Some heard the call of the azaan
The swords, some bravely fought and scattered
Some others yet, did treacherous deeds
Jaychand did Prithviraj in
Mir Jafar became a byword for this sin
Setting up bodies for swords to plunge;
The mosaic spewed blood and soaked herself
Looking the more noble and resplendent

The Parsis came to my shores fleeing Muslim persecution in Iran. My son the Prince of Surat hesitated but briefly. The refugee assured him that his tribe will mingle with us like sugar in milk; they will sweeten the country but ever remain an unobtrusive presence. My son embraced him and the refugees became guests and very soon, my sons and daughters. And they kept their word through a millennium. I kept my word too. For, before entering, the refugee told the Prince, “Your Highness! We have fled from religious persecution. Ours is a religion of peace. We need to preserve it. You must promise that not the shadow of a darvand (non-believer) shall fall on any of our places of worship.” Now it may be that conditions are not to be laid down by refugees or guests or even sons and daughters. But that is me. My son accepted and kept his word. I kept my word - as host and as Mother - through a millennium. You ask what my essence is; here is a bit of it. I don’t just tolerate other faiths and opinions and life-styles. I give them the space to grow and flower. And they become part of me.

My soil is fertile. A thousand crops feed on me and grow and my soil forever unifies. Weeds have sprouted and swarms of locusts have descended on me. Wave upon wave of relentless Muslim invasion swept over me. My temples were desecrated and destroyed, my cities sacked. My children were asked to pay a special tax. They did a lot of harm, these unthinking hordes even after they ascended the throne; they maimed and scarred me. In the end, I always won even if they ruled, for they too and their ways became part of me. They became my sons and daughters. So it is that one of them, the Mughuls, Dara Shikoh became a scholar of the Vedas better than many of my older children. So it is that in the holy town of Kashi in the north, the annual festival at the Viswanath temple always commenced with the shehnai recital by one of my famous sons.
Bismillah Khan until his recent death. A Muslim singing to God in a Hindu temple in that bastion of Hinduism, the religion followed by the oldest of my sons and daughters! Without unity how can a thousand flowers bloom? In the southern extremity thousands of my Hindu children trek up the Sabarimala Hills seeking the blessings of Lord Ayyappa. They stop at a Muslim shrine before ascending the hill. On the way they listen to songs in praise of the Lord sung by another child of mine – Jesudas, a bearded Christian with a soulful voice. The Vailankanni Church, now is that Christian or Hindu? No one asks. Everyone seems headed there. That’s me. You ask what my essence is; here is one more bit. Others change me. I seep into them. They become mine, they become me.

That was me in the seventeenth century – a land of peace, a land of diverse cultures and of plenty. The mosaic was a beautiful sight to behold.

At first it appeared the mosaic had two tiles
One the smaller was a dark and lovely shade of green
With huge patches of saffron: the other, vastly bigger
Appeared all sacred saffron but behold!
There were small and secure oases of green all over
And behold yet, there were specks of red and white
And orange, blue and grey and yellow
And shades of every imaginative hue
Each itself, yet lost in vast placid saffron

But the mosaic was also an object of envy for some.

Came the noble white carriers of earth’s burden
They stole and pillaged, maimed and killed and saw with fear
The vanquished possessed of superior ways
Their unity etched in multi-coloured stone
This did not suit their purpose, did not warrant them
So they set their hearts to destroy the oneness
They drew lines all across – white, smudgy and ugly
Caste and religion came in handy
They played these for all they were worth
The colours deepened, lines sharpened, differences strengthened
The green turned shades deeper
And the saffron shades brighter
And poignant irony! They claimed, nothing
But the white lines held the pieces together.

There was something sinister and insidious about the approach of the British. They did not seek merely to subjugate; they sought to kill our spirit. They taught us to look on ourselves with contempt. Was there a single division amongst us that they spared?
The noble carriers did not rest;  
To further carry rift and division  
They made up many a self-serving myth  
“Aryan” the most enduring of them all  
Disproved and yet not discarded

They taught a few of us in their tongue to make us their lackeys in spirit forever.

“These lowly natives need some learning  
But not in their juvenile native tongues  
A score though they may be in number  
Of significant literature there is none  
Trivial stuff; makes up no more than a shelf  
Let us do our bit with the King’s own tongue  
Create a small army of clerks and scriveners  
That looks like them but thinks like us  
It will help us oppress them with them”

So baa baa black sheep gave lots of wool  
For us to keep in Indian summer, our cool  
So Jack and Jill went up the hill  
And Indians came tumbling after

Sikhs were an integral part of Hindu society; the great Guru, Govind Singhji asked every Hindu family to spare one of their sons to become a Singh (Lion) in the service of the people – to safeguard the religion. Yet what did the cunning British do?

The turbaned Sikhs he made a separate martial race  
“Forget you sprang as saffron’s sword arm”, he said  
When the East took hurt and revolted  
In freedom’s first war in 1857  
The wily whites sent turbans out to quell them  
Dispatched martyrs all, from the mouths of canons  
And peace prevailed. The Queen ruled.  
And the sun set in the east.

Bengal had posed a grave danger to the British early on. The first war of independence of 1857 started here with Hindus and Muslims standing shoulder to shoulder.
This part of the mosaic looked beautiful
Steeped in poetry; suffused with learning
Rich with writing, resonant with music
And strident leadership to cap it all
“No, they said, “we cannot suffer Bengal”
Then the shame of it all
Curse-one who smeared that bloody line
And cleaved the noble state in two
The Hindu West and the Muslim East

Again and again it happened. Different times, different places, same strategy.
Play one against the other. Now it was Punjab in 1919.

Decades went by; the rebellious turbans were on boil
This time ‘round, they got them mowed, in Amritsar
That was the heinous Jallianwala Bagh Massacre
Using the loyal fearless Gorkhas, led by Dreadful Dyer

But all the while there was a coming together happening – Hindus and Muslims,
Parsees and Christians, North, East, South and West rose together. They rallied
behind a new star that appeared on the firmament, one of my noblest sons,
Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi.

By now a little master strode like a colossus
He it was who told us of the mosaic, its patterns
There is no Muslim, Hindu, Christian! Oh Indian!
We all are one, he said, children of Mother India
He spoke inspiring words, did many a great deed
To prove that over and over

The British could not countenance this. And so they instigated another of my
sons – a lean cadaverous lawyer – once an ardent nationalist and ambassador of
Hindu-Muslim unity – now smarting and chafing at the periphery of the freedom
struggle. Used to making fine rousing speeches for home rule in typical British
style, he was distinctly uncomfortable with the inclusive politics of the little
master. Gandhiji said loudly and repeatedly that I (Mother India) live, my spirit
resides, in my 700,000 villages, not in the salons of the rich and the famous in
my metropolises. So, the lean and mean one started echoing the sentiments of
the famous poet, Mohammed Iqbal.
It started way back in nineteen thirty
When a great poet did, in a weak moment, speak
Green and saffron do not jell, he cried in beautiful verse
Aeons of co-existence and culture mingling notwithstanding

Yes, the same poet had earlier written “Sare Jahan Se Acha, Hindustan Hamara”. For fifteen years, the forces of Adharma worked on me. They first laid the foundation stone of discord and incompatibility, then placed brick upon brick of illogic till finally they did the dance of death on me and cut me in two. I wept and I bled at the sight of this new nation born in sin. And they called it the land of the pure – Pakistan. But still I won. What were my victories?

At the height of the British Raj, they arraigned my little master again and again. One time, it was on a charge of sedition and when the prisoner entered the court, Justice Broomfield rose in his chair in greeting. And then, finally, my oppressors left my shores as friends. What were my weapons? One was non-violence and the other I got from my oppressors – the English language. Are these not victories?

One of my sons, a genial Pathan giant, Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan, whose Muslim homeland wanted to be in India but was ceded to Pakistan, wept at the death of undivided India. Sad as it makes me to think of it even today, was that not a victory?

My epic tele-serials Ramyana and Mahabharatha were watched avidly in Pakistan. Is that not a victory?

But were my troubles over? No, they never will be. I have fought wars with Pakistan and I won. In 1971, not one of my Arab brothers supported me though I had always stood by them. In fact, the whole world barring the Soviet Union was united against me. I still won. I liberated the eastern half of Pakistan. In later years, Punjab revolted and I won. The North-East boiled over and I cooled it. Kashmir in my northern extremity is like a wound in my head but it will heal. I will win. I continue to suffer and I continue to win. That’s me. I am always challenged and I have to keep proving myself – forever.

One of my sons, a migrant in the West Indies, called me the land of a million mutinies. He is absolutely right but what he failed to note is the significance of the fact that I still survive. So should I not also be called the land of a million victories?

For fifteen years now, I have been growing rapidly and the world thinks I am going to be the economic powerhouse of this century. My own children are at times not that bullish though they talk and act now with greater confidence.

You ask me what my essence is? You want me to describe myself in one word? I am a kaleidoscope, I have been one always. There are innumerable disparate pieces within me. New, often jagged ones from without add to the melee.
They are jostling one another all the time. But look closely and you will see the pieces forming luminous patterns all the time. They are highly irregular, these patterns. You will be hard put to describing them but the wonder of it is, the pieces all hang together and that is a beautiful sight to behold.

I can go on and on but must stop somewhere.

I have come a long way but I realize I have a long way to go.

I am not young, I am not old. I am ageless, timeless. I was always around.
The Many Facets of India

Anupama Krishnakumar

Diversity

Intriguing, Incredible, Mystic
Adjectives that indelibly stick
That’s a face of India we know
And we call her rightly so!

She’s the land of bearded sadhus
The land of many religious views
The land of the incredible Taj
The land that intrigued the British Raj.

Diversity is her other name
That brings her much of her fame.
From green pastures to rocky terrains
And sandy deserts to fertile plains!

From Idli and Sambar down South
And Dhoklas of west to tease the mouth
Soft Rotis and yellowy Dal up North
Fish of the east to add to the broth!

From what we wear to the work we do
Such examples of variety are far too few
Hailed she is as the timeless beauty
She, the pinnacle of diversity!

Poverty

And yet there’s the blot on her face
As roadside huts fight for some space
Existence, and not living’s their hinge
It’s poverty that makes you cringe!

Tattered clothes and stink of the poor
A mighty menace that makes India quiver
Disease and illiteracy, its ugly offspring
It’s growth that poverty’s threatening!
A land of extremes they all say
It can’t be truer in any better way
Oh, what a sharp divide there exists
In a resourceful country as this!

The Bright Young Face

He sits and types away at his desk
In a cushioned seat from dawn to dusk
He is the bright young face of new India
A generation that says dude, gosh and yeah!

First a bike, then a car, and then a house,
It’s a dream life that many a man loves;
He is the face – educated and well-to-do
The new face of India, bright and anew!

From science and ads to space and sport
They go round the globe trot, trot, trot.
Visionaries call them the building blocks
Making India a nation that sure rocks!

And then there are the businessmen
Who are out innovating ever so often
We sure do count on each one of them
For the ‘made in India’ tag to gain momentum.

Ah, may we not miss, the entrepreneur,
The proud children who’re out to cure,
The many social ills that plague this land
Giving their mother that helping hand.

When they married!

Talk of social ills, so many there are!
He, the son of a rich man, his father’s star.
His lady love, their driver’s daughter
Can the caste tussle get any hotter?

Tried their might, they did, to convince
Little interest did their arguments evince
A woman from a lower caste? Impossible!
He heard his mom cry, yell and ramble!
So, elope they did, to lead a happy life
Earned they did everyone’s cursed strife!
In the name of honour, we don’t need her,
Said the ill-fated, love-struck woman’s brother!

The media screamed, fourth-estate it claimed
Justice shut its eyes tight, it appeared
And not before long, the story helplessly faded
As people scurried – their life had to be lived!

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**When a baby girl speaks..**

Am finally here, I beamed
In a world that I dreamed
When I saw grandma's lip curl
And say it is a baby girl..

Unfamiliar it all seemed
As all the men screamed
This day that I bloomed
They said all was doomed..

Where first cries were treasured
In angry voices they were buried
We want her no more, they said
It’s only ill luck I bred..

I meant good to none
Save her, the only one,
One, who would stop to bother
She, my poor dear mother..

Yet, I felt her palm moisten
Momma, not this bad, bitter poison
Momma, give me your goo' food
Pray, why should I be done for good?

Minds crooked and bent, O'Gracious Death
Tell me, is this life's worth?
This world, I know, I shall never miss
Please silence me, with your kiss..
The need of the hour

It’s a mighty big war against many foes
Population, terror, corruption, chaos
Emerging we have been for years now
Time for us to take a bow!

It’s the right attitude that now matters
Join hands, shred the hitches to tatters
These need to be taken beyond writing
Many small steps for nation building!

A mammoth task it indeed is
Make a difference in little ways
Social responsibility holds the key
And so does literacy
An initiative no matter how small
To improve health and bring awareness to all
A leader for India’s cause each of us will be
Let’s tell ourselves, it begins with me!

Picture by paral lax
Behind the Scenes

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